Contents

4
The Devil in the Detail
By Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

22
The Devil's Bride By Walter Chaw

54
Notes on the restoration

56
Acknowledgements

All B&W Production Photos -- Photographer credit: Rimvydas Strikauskas.
Courtesy of the Lithuanian Theatre, Music and Cinema Museum

THE DEVIL IN THE DETAIL

By

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas

Colors flash across the screen and songs soar and swell - *The Devil's Bride* is, first and foremost, a sensory experience so delighted by its capacity for its proud, brazen excess that anything less than full-throttle euphoria frankly seems like far too lacklustre a response. But peel back the surface, and we find what is perhaps a surprisingly complex film, whose historical, folkloric and other contextual elements are woven together to form a deeply compelling and dazzling tapestry.

By the time he made *The Devil's Bride*, Lithuanian filmmaker Arūnas Žebriūnas had already been making feature films for well over a decade. His was a career that up until this point at least generally typified film historian Peter Rollberg's suggestion that a pervasive, dominant focus on children and their worlds "permitted a quasi-naive, non-ideological reality", a seemingly safe bet for Lithuanian national cinema during the Soviet era. "It was far more difficult to address questions of contemporary social relevance", Rollberg continued, "and directors who attempted such an approach experienced considerable censorship challenges." It was within this context that Lithuanian movies with what might be described as more mature ambitions struggled, with Algirdas Dausa's and Almantas Grikevičius's widely celebrated *Feelings* (*Jausmai*, 1968) which was banned by Soviet authorities beyond Lithuania's borders perhaps the most notable amongst them.

For Rollberg, Žebriūnas's 1964 film *The Girl and the Echo* (*Paskutinė atostogų diena*) typified this tendency to instead focus on kids, presenting a romantic vision of childhood summer holidays. Maintaining his interest in childhood and children's stories, in 1966 Žebriūnas tackled adaptation in a live-action reimagining of Antoine de Saint-Exupery's iconic French classic, *The Little Prince*, released in Lithuania as *Mažasis princas*. Children are similarly at the heart of *Death and the Cherry Tree* (*Mirtis ir vyšnios medis*, 1969) and *The Beauty* (*Gražuolė*, 1969), where Žebriūnas further continued his fascination in the experience of childhood, mapping out the often complex interpersonal dynamics between kids that adults often actively deny or remain unconsciously blind to.

But it was in *Nightbird* (*Nakitbalda*, 1973) - the film that immediately preceded *The Devil's Bride* - that Žebriūnas began to delve into the world of the fantastic in a way that would largely set the scene for his famous folk/rock opera. Clocking in at just over an hour, *Nightbird* - like so many of Žebriūnas's previous films - also centrally privileged children and childhood. Yet the fantastic adventures of his child protagonist here would soon become in *The Devil's Bride* a notable point in distinction in what was very much a movie about adults; their lives and loves, albeit shot through the prism of folkloric fantasy.

Reflecting on a filmography that would go on to include later movies like *Walnut Bread* (*Riešutų duona*, 1977) and *Travel to Paradise* (*Kelionė į rojų*, 1980), for Rollberg:

> Žebriūnas's films are distinguished by a superb visual taste and a non-cliched, inquisitive approach to themes of love and trust, all handled in a quiet, rather aloof manner. In reaction to some of his films, Žebriūnas was accused of 'abstract humanism', that is, of not allowing Communist principles to dominate common human values.

While pre-Soviet Lithuania had a relatively thriving film industry (particularly in the field of documentary), the realities of Soviet occupation for the half-century from 1940 to 1990 - particularly up to Stalin's death in 1953 - clearly impacted the kinds of movies that could be made in

the country during this period. Within this context, *The Devil's Bride*'s lighthearted comic musical twist on traditional folklore appeared harmless enough. But by overtly riffing on the foreign success of David Greene's *Godspell* and Norman Jewison's *Jesus Christ Superstar* - both from 1973 - in retrospect it is clear that the west was in a general sense making in-roads into Soviet cinema in Lithuania at least, one zeitgeist-drunk, dizzying rock opera at a time.

Even putting Žebriūnas to the side for a moment, *The Devil's Bride* came pre-packed with heavy hitters. In this sense, the involvement of Lithuanian-Israeli jazz icon Vyacheslav Genelin is surely as central to *The Devil's Bride* story as Žebriūnas himself. Moving to Lithuania as a young child with his family from Moscow, music was a part of the young Ganelin's life from an early age, and he would study - and later teach - at the esteemed Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre in Vilnius. By the time Ganelin and Žebriūnas collaborated on *The Devil's Bride*, the two men had already successfully worked together on both *The Beauty* and *Nightbird*, but here clearly the sheer amount of music needed was significantly larger. Today recognized as a key figure in Lithuanian jazz, *The Devil's Bride* remains a key part to Ganelin's broader success story, appearing roughly around the same time his work with the jazz/folk trio GTCh (or the Ganelin Trio) was similarly beginning to take off. The Trio's influence was not restricted to Lithuania alone, playing at the Warsaw Jazz Jamboree in 1976, the Berlin Jazz Festival in 1980, and UK and US tours in 1984 and 1986 respectively.

Likewise, *The Devil's Bride* had impressive literary roots, also. Adapted from Kazys Boruta's 1945 novel *Whitehorn's Windmill* (*Baltaragio malūnas, arba kas dėjosi anuo metu Paudruvės krašte*), Boruta's original text has endured as a Lithuanian literary classic. Republished in 1962, it was during its second wave of popularity that it came to Ganelin's attention, who set to work adapting it, initially to an opera in 1973. It would, of course, be Ganelin's opera that Žebriūnas would in large part bring to life on screen in the later film version itself.

While Boruta's folklore-imbued story about an ill-fated deal with the devil also lies at the heart of *The Devil's Bride*, in Ganelin's and Žebriūnas's

hands the original novel's bleak ending where the bulk of the key cast are apparently wiped out by the irate Baltic god of thunder Perkūnas has been notably replaced by something distinctly more upbeat. Likewise, Boruta's original prose was given a lyrical twist by Lithuanian poet (and later, politician) Sigitas Geda. The influence of Ganelin's reimagining of *Whitehorn's Windmill* did not stop at Žebriūnas's film, of course, and would also inspire a 1979 ballet by Lithuanian ballet master Vytautas Brazdylis, who restaged his version of the tale as recently as 2011.

Of course, even beyond the then popular rock opera format that saw stage-musicals-turned-successful-movies like *Godspell* and *Jesus Christ Superstar* sweep the world, the narrative and thematic nuts-and-bolts of *The Devil's Bride* reflect a much longer heritage. While often referred to by the shorthand of the Faustian bargain, so pervasive is the deal-with-the-devil motif that it features in Stith Thompson's pioneering folk literature motif index which has become a staple reference text in folklore studies since it was first published in 1932. Such diabolical pacts can be found historically everywhere from the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) - the so-called "Hammer of Witches" employed as a justification to torture and prosecute accused so-called 'witches' in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries - to the plight of Saint Theophilus the Penitent, the sixth century Anatolian religious cleric broadly considered a major influence on the legend of Faust.

Yet while both *Whitehorn's Windmill* and *The Devil's Bride* clearly reimagine this broader trope, it is how they specifically cast it anew through the lens of Lithuanian folklore that surely accounted for their enduring popular appeal. In the case of the latter, it is without doubt the striking cinematic qualities of the film in particular that render it such an extraordinary viewing experience, even for non-Lithuanian audiences discovering it for the first time, now over 40 years since its original release. The kinetic camera work of cinematographer Algimantas Mockus, the life and movement rendered visible by the editorial team of Vanda Zavadskaitė, Vanda Survilienė and Ona Diržytė, and the unique psychedelic-yet-rustic charm of Filomena Vaitiekūnienė's production design all combine to powerful effect in a finished product that positively bounces off the screen.

And yet at the heart of this, it is the manner with which *The Devil's Bride* combines Lithuanian folk song, dance and storytelling traditions with contemporary jazz and rock music that grant it its unique recipe for success. At the heart of this we find our little red-haired devil himself, Pinčiukas, brought so joyfully to life by Lithuanian screen icon Gediminas Girdvainis, who had previously appeared in Žebriūnas's The Beauty and made his screen debut in a small uncredited role in Dausa's and Grikevičius's pioneering *Feelings.*

A cursory look at Wikipedia might belie the complexity to the figure of Pinčiukas, described there as a demonic or evil being prone to mischief, whose eponymous reference to the Belarusian city of Pinsk implicitly hinges on the fact that - like foreigners - these figures are both outsiders and assumed to be up to no good. Upon closer inspection, however, as revered Lithuanian archeologist and anthropologist Marija Gimbutas wrote, Pinčiukas was in fact one of the many names given to the Lithuanian folk deity Velnias, whose "name could not be pronounced for taboo reasons, and instead many other names were used". For Gimbutas:

> The standard Lithuanian Velnias…is now a term for "devil". Some two hundred years ago Velnias was still one of the most important pre-Christian Baltic deities: the god of the dead and of cattle (wealth and fertility). His role in Baltic mythology can be reconstructed by means of historical record and folklore.

She continued:

> The recognition of Velnias's ancient features in folklore as one of the very important pre-Christian gods fills a gap in the study of Baltic mythology. The Baltic Velnias was no less important than and of similar stature as Veles/Volos in Slavic, Odin and Ull in Old Norse, Varuna in Indic, and Hades and Hermes in Greek mythology.

A key figure in the pantheon of Lithuanian gods and mythological figures, in *The Devil's Bride* he is reimagined here specifically as Pinčiukas, and notably shown at the beginning of the film especially as having a direct

relationship with the Lithuanian folkloric figure of Dievas, who mirrors the classical image of the wise, aged Christian God as an elderly man who finds parallels in other mythological deities such as Zeus in Ancient Greece.

It is then largely through the figure of Pinčiukas that we can start to unpack the extraordinarily effective way that *The Devil's Bride* taps directly and explicitly into very specific Lithuanian folk traditions and beliefs, while at the same time remaining broadly legible and coherent to non-Lithuanian viewers, even today. Because to merely look at Girdvainis's Pinčiukas, the shared iconographic features of small stature and red hair might implicitly provoke instant subconscious associations with the leprechaun of Irish folklore, a kind of trickster-fairy similarly known for mischief-making.

The idea of the devil as a kind of trickster figure is, of course, hardly specific to Lithuania. An enduring, durable cross-cultural figure who can be traced back to Norse and Ancient Greek mythology, the trickster at their core is a necessarily disruptive, transgressive force whose penchant for play contains frequently subversive aspects; as Joseph Campbell wrote in 1959, the trickster is the "epitome of the principle of disorder, [but] he is nevertheless the culture bringer also". From a Jungian perspective, the archetypal trickster is a kind of collective shadow that dwells in the unconscious of supposedly 'civilized' societies, the embodiment of a given community's most repressed fears, desires and hypocrisies.

That Pinčiukas is a devil-trickster can then be both understood in this general sense, and also in terms of the specific nuances of his character. For William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, there are six traits typical of the trickster, regardless of the culture from which they emerge. These can combine, allowing dynamic, complex re-imaginings to take shape across its vast history. For Hynes and Doty, tricksters are first and foremost both anomalous and ambiguous; they play tricks and are deceptive; they can be shape-shifters; they invert situations; they are messengers and can imitate gods; and they are *bricoleurs* who engage with both the lewd and the sacred.

When transposed into cinema, Helena Bassil-Morozow suggested aspects of the traditional trickster figure appear in powerful new ways. On screen, the trickster is identifiable through their "licentiousness, love of freedom, dislike for all types of boundaries, fragmented/flexible body (symbolizing his transformative powers), propensity to lie and general dislike of the truth, lack of stable identity … and erratic behaviour". Tricksters too are creatures of liminality, and Pinčiukas's ability to cross different realms is yet another of the traits that tether him firmly to this devil-trickster tradition. Pinčiukas from this perspective wholly embodies the devil-trickster as a kind of interdimensional conman, a disruptive figure who can be only conquered when the tables are turned and he himself is ironically on the receiving end of trickery.

From the late 1960s onwards, the devil in all his international iterations - Pinčiukas included - was having something of a cross-cultural contemporary renaissance. The front cover of *Time* magazine on the 19th June 1972 famously announced "The Occult Revival: Satan Returns", its sensational headline splashed over an ominous photograph of an anonymous figure in a black hood with a demonic goat's head scrawled anxiously across its visage in bright red crayon. While focused on the United States, the trends identified within the article itself were hardly specific to this single national context:

> Despite such malevolent connections, Satan remained a temptingly attractive figure. Milton made him such a hero that next to him Christ looked almost pallid. Faust's fiendish friend, Mephistopheles, is one of literature's great protagonists. It is no new thing for the Rolling Stones to conjure up Sympathy for the Devil. He had it long ago, even from so famous a church father as Origen, who speculated that Satan and his fallen angels would be saved at the end of time. Even the Enlightenment did not do the Devil in. Just as ancient Romans flocked to mystery cults in the days of religious and political decay, so do more modern men seek out the occult in times of stress or excessive pragmatism. The Victorian period saw one such flowering, the 1920s another. Now an occult revival has come to the space age.

Even just in terms of popular culture, Hollywood alone embraced the return of the devil. In 1968, *Rosemary's Baby* was an international blockbuster smash hit, directed by Polish filmmaker Roman Polanski who would himself make headline news when his pregnant wife Sharon Tate and six others were murdered by members of Charles Manson's cult The Family during a killing spree in August 1969. As the mastermind of the shocking crimes, Manson ghoulishly became an overnight celebrity, bringing a new hippy twist to the old fashioned figure of the devil.

Yet an infatuation with the devil was hardly a uniquely American affair. In the 1960s and 1970s in Europe, a similar fascination with Satan and the occult similarly flourished, particularly in the terrain of horror cinema. From this perspective, *The Devil's Bride* can be considered as much a part of a then-current European wave of movies defined by this core, zeitgeist-defining fascination in the devil as it can the rock musical. Satan and his ilk were kept busy in British movies of this era in films including Terence Fisher's *The Devil Rides Out* (1968), Vernon Sewell's *Curse of the Crimson Altar* (1969), Piers Haggard's *Blood On Satan's Claw* (1971) and Peter Sykes's *To the Devil a Daughter* (1976). From Spain, Amando de Ossorio's *The Ghost Galleon* (*El buque maldito*, 1974) centers on devil-worshipping zombified 16th century Knights Templar, while Paul Naschy gives the devil's return to Earth more comic treatment in 1979's *The Traveller* (*El caminante*). The Italian gothic horror classics of iconic scream queen Barbara Steele loved a good demonic reference in their title, from Mario Bava's *The Mask of Satan* (*La maschera del demonio*, also known as *Black Sunday*) in 1960 to Camillo Mastrocinque's *An Angel for Satan* (*Un angelo per Satana*) in 1966, while the 1971 Belgian-Italian co-production *Devil's Nightmare* (*La plus longue nuit du diable*) combines the Satanic cult trope with that of the haunted house.

It is, of course, perhaps stating the obvious that *The Devil's Bride* is not a horror film in any sense of the word, nor even can it be considered a horror musical, despite the centrality of the eponymous figure of the devil, our regionally specific demonic trickster, Pinčiukas. But, created as it was in the throes of Soviet occupation of Lithuania, in a strange and oddly poetic way, the film speaks today in its own unique way to many of the things that traditionally fascinate horror thematically. Like the best horror

movies, *The Devil's Bride* too asks questions about power - who has it, who wants it, and what will people do to get it - and, when those limits are pushed beyond the realms of what we consider "possible" in the realm of Earthly normality, it seems literally anything can happen.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that both the folkloric traditions from which *The Devil's Bride* stems and the historical origins of horror cinema overlap in the significant shared space of the fairy tale. *The Devil's Bride* might not technically tick the definitional box of a fairy tale for the scholars and academic who have dedicated their lives to its study, but to a regular audience it sure as hell feels like one, with its fair maidens, menacing supernatural foes, true love conquering all, and life lessons learned in abundance. And it is here, finally perhaps, that Žebriūnas's film is tethered to yet another enduring cinema tradition that makes it feel both refreshingly new yet simultaneously familiar: that of the musical fairy tale. Vaiva Mainelytė who plays both Marcelė and Jurga might not perhaps be as famous or as beloved as Catherine Deneuve in Jacques Demy's *Donkey Skin* (*Peau d'âne*, 1970), but in its own way Mainelytė, Girdvainis, Ganelin, Žebriūnas and all their contributors render *The Devil's Bride* as something just as distinct, just as magical, and just as infectious in terms of its pure robust musicality, let alone its folkloric moxie. If you look carefully enough, magic can happen anywhere - even in Soviet-era Lithuania.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas is an award-winning film critic and author of ten books on cult, horror and exploitation cinema including *1000 Women in Horror*, *The Giallo Canvas*, *The Cinema Coven*, and *Eyes Without Faces: Masks in Horror Cinema*.

WORKS CITED

"The Occult Revival: A Substitute Faith", *Time Magazine*, 19 June 1972 https://time.com/archive/6815485/the-occult-revival-a-substitute-faith/

Helena Bassil-Morozow, *The Trickster in Contemporary Film* (Routledge, 2012).

Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (Penguin, 1959).

Marija Gimbutas. "The Lithuanian God Velnias", in *Myth in Indo-European Antiquity*, ed. Gerald Hames Larson (University of California Press, 1974), 87-92.

William J. Hynes and William G. Doty, *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms* (University of Alabama Press, 1993).

Peter Rollberg, *Historical Dictionary of Russian and Soviet Cinema* (Rowman & LIttlefield, 2016).

THE DEVIL'S BRIDE

By

Walter Chaw

There is a particular connection between music and matters of God. As I was watching Arūnas Žebriūnas' *The Devil's Bride,* I thought a lot about how we survived as a species - how inadequate we are in the wild compared to our furred, clawed and fanged competitors and how it's literally our addiction to stories that gave us an evolutionary advantage. I thought, too, of how those first stories must have been horror tales: thrillers about narrow escapes from places to avoid, practices to employ when coming upon monsters, and explanations for, and instructions for the avoidance of, inexplicable events - catastrophes, plagues, dead crops and troubling disappearances. The invention of the supernatural is part of our evolutionary strategy: if I make you afraid of eating something that spoils quickly in our environment by creating a story about divine wrath it will be more effective than saying the world is lawless and chaotic and you take your chances. Belief in the supernatural is a form of optimism. And how did we spread these stories? How did we tell them to one another? Paintings on walls and language of course, and song, too, maybe even especially, passed through time until the process of evolution renders just the tones themselves pleasurable… or indeed terrible. Why do we tap our feet when we hear a compelling beat? Why do we regard with revulsion people who proclaim their dislike for music? We are hardwired. We sing in churches, secular and ecclesiastical: stadiums and in the rounds, in enormous groups or small bands. For a while, traveling through the country on the lips of minstrels and troubadours; employed by the powerful to play at court and whispered soft against the skin from mother to child. Film was never really silent and its first feature-length, transition to fully-synchronized sound was on the back of a musical starring a Lithuanian Jew who was the greatest Broadway performer of his era.

I thought about all these things and more in the first propulsive, expectations-obliterating moments of Lithuania's miraculous *The Devil's Bride* (*Velnio nuotaka*, Arūnas Žebriūnas), a prologue that could stand with any of the great opening sequences of world cinema. It powerfully, *elementally*, captures at once a sense of timelessness and then somehow the story of a very specific place and time. It is intimately, heartbreakingly personal and bracingly political: compulsively silly with a deadly serious undertone - instantly recognizable in the way of archetypes and yet presented in a way so novel it nearly exists as a one-of-one. Imagine a Ken Russell *Faust* from a script by Jiří Weiss. It may have even replaced *The Wicker Man* as my favorite musical. I don't know how to begin to describe it if you haven't seen it. I mean, you've seen echoes and elements of it from dozens of different sources, but not assembled in this way and not carved down into a single blast of stunning exuberance. It's like Spock's response to Bones in *Star Trek IV*: it's going to be hard to tell you what a transformational event is like until you've experienced it for yourself. It's not even predictable for admirers of Žebriūnas, the son of a military officer who grew up in athletics and graduated from Vilnius Academy of Arts with an architectural degree. (Now I'm thinking of Sean Connery's Marko Aleksandrovich Ramius from John McTiernan's *The Hunt for Red October* who is referred to as "the Vilnius Schoolmaster"). Žebriūnas joined the Lithuanian Film Studios in 1955, a company founded in 1940 as a co-endeavor with Russia's Lenfilm, where he contributed to his first film, a segment of the four-part *The Living Heroes*, in 1959. If you knew of him before *The Devil's Bride*, in other words, you knew him as a maker of quiet, poetic elegies for the passing of innocence.

If you're looking for militaristic or, really, even architectural details in Žebriūnas' work, I think you'll be disappointed. His best known film is the ravishing *The Girl and the Echo* (1964) about a little girl, Vika (Lina Braknytė) at play on a beach on the last day of a summer she's spent with her grandfather (Kaarel Karm). The film opens with her playing a horn along the shore - the very image of a heroine of a Wallace Stevens poem who charts the border between the attempt at order imposed by man upon a wild and untameable nature and that wildness and instability itself. Vika meets a young boy, Roman (Valeryi Zubarev), whom she befriends but Roman, trying to pass a painful rite of passage amongst a group of

young boys, betrays Vika by forcing her to humiliate herself before them. I'm describing a horror film, and in look and feeling - even in overarching themes about the loss of innocence - it does resemble Peter Brook's adaptation of *Lord of the Flies* (1963), but *The Girl and the Echo* plays more like John Sayles' *The Secret of Roan Inish*: a recounting of a small, regional fairytale that carries with it tremendous archetypal resonance of course, but mostly lodges in the memory as a delicate, trembling artifact of all of our childhoods. I am shaken upon reflection how what this film is really about is how a young woman's greatest ally is her voice; how the greatest moment of her development is when she hears it for the first time reflected back to her. It's Lacan as sonnet. I think where you're most likely to find hints to Žebriūnas' background and training is in the balanced structure of his work: the tightness and functionality of it. They are each cantilevered testaments to construction. There's not an ounce of flab on them.

It's the efficiency of his work that makes Žebriūnas so suited to the adaptation of fable and ties a piece as quietly devastating as *The Girl and the Echo* to the audacity of *The Devil's Bride*. Žebriūnas musical opens on a text card setting the scene in Heaven, the rolling, verdant hills of the Caucasus mountains subbing, where God (a nonplussed Jonas Pakulis) in his throne sits in the midst of an adoring coterie of his angels. It is Heaven as imagined by Rodgers & Hammerstein and the boys at Technicolor and it's a pleasure for the eye. The first of composer Vyacheslav Ganelin's songs swells while poet Sigitas Geda provides the plaintive book. The song sounds not unlike Gerome Ragni and James Rado's "The Age of Aquarius" from their *Hair* musical, the film version of which was directed by Czech ex-patriot Miloš Forman. I mention Forman because he's a product of a film industry from a country, the Czech Republic, that shares a close geography and a similar history to Lithuania's: one influenced in large part by being sandwiched between bellicose 20th century entities Germany and the Soviet Union. Like Czechia, Lithuania's story is marked by annexation, invasion, separation and, in Lithuania's case, eventual reunion. Similar regional histories breed similar, I think, approaches and worldviews which in turn speak to the rhythms and themes of the art they produce: the stories they tell one another to rationalize misfortune and capricious aggression will rhyme if they've been raised by the same abusive parents.

Much of the ethos of *The Devil's Bride* in other words feels like it would fit in with that of the filmmakers of the Czech New Wave (the American New Wave, too, in the Watergate/Vietnam era) - meaning that, immediately, the comparison of this musical to one directed by Forman provides a critical vein prime for the mining.

Note the playful, blasphemous irony of *The Devil's Bride*, the cosmology that finds God asleep on His golden throne while His angels cavort, freed from the supervision of their Holy Father. The longer He slumbers, the more His angels reveal how beneath each of their robes they nurse the seeds of rebellion. Each of the angels are potential Lucifers in suspenders and bowler hats and fab mod slips - individual thinkers, randy, voracious (as soon as God sleeps, his angels gorge themselves at a richly-appointed banquet), and held only loosely in check by a stern, but doddering, even sundowning, authority. A neglectful God is first and most obviously a critique of fascist government; of systems of oppression like, say, a state-hijacked organized religion which so often functions as the handmaiden to fascism; and, less obviously, the last recourse of the religious who must at some point rationalize how a benevolent deity could allow all the abominations He allows. It can't be that a monotheistic Godhead is bad… so it must be that His non-intervention isn't evidence of disinterest, but merely an unfortunately-timed nap. Think of that Hallmark scroll "Footprints" homily ("*During your times of trial, where you only see one set of footprints, that was where I was carrying you*") except whenever things were a horrorshow and there's only one set of footprints, it was then that the Lord was sleeping, man, my bad. The conception of an absent, detached God is a decidedly Romanticist one: a theology that prioritizes Nature as the first testament of God rather than any creation touched by Man like a book or even a song. And so *The Devil's Bride* opens in the great natural beauty of the mountains. This is Heaven, you see, evidence of God's genius and terrible things have happened here so fasten your seatbelts.

The year before *The Devil's Bride,* Norman Jewison's film version of Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) was released in the United States. In the few western considerations of *The Devil's Bride*, it's this piece rather than the more cogent comparison

Hair that has become the go-to analogue largely, I suspect, because of the ties they share to Christian theology and just the fact that both are musicals. The essential, some would say radical, humanism that underpins Romanticist movements is more in line with *Hair*, though - a lugubrious (in hindsight and by comparison to *The Devil's Bride*) bacchanal that skewers both America's misguided colonial "police action" intervention in Vietnam and its deep-rooted and ultimately fatal racial and sexual hypocrisy at home. *Hair* is a salvo from a defeated resistance: the post mortem for New Age spiritualism, "Flower Power" and the hippie moment that defined an entire decade while only covering a couple of years of real time. It was a progressive revolution with neither a plan for an endgame nor a strategy to avoid the corruption that attends absolute power. It was winning to lose and a slew of political assassinations cemented progressivism's defeat in the United States. In 1979, *Hair* is already more relic than rally (it has more in common with Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* and Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* from the same year, than the already nihilistic *Easy Rider* from 1969), but it remains an effective, outraged warning from a culture (Czechoslovakia's and now America's, too) that's been through it before and believes it will go through it again. Human societies, after all, tend toward fascism specifically when the stories it tells about itself are immediately hijacked by the ruling class after fomenting for ages amongst the rebels. Mark Hamill told me once that when George Lucas made *Star Wars*, he was part of The Rebellion. By the time he made *Return of the Jedi*, he was already a member of the Empire. As stories go, so goes a society. And so it goes.

God finally wakes in *The Devil's Bride* and in his mute wrath, he expels the angel Pinčiukas (Gediminas Girvainis), casting him down from Heaven into the miller Baltaragis' (Vasilijus Simčičius) frog pond. Did I mention the gay kiss in heaven? Hallelujah. Pinčiukas can't really swim, is clothed only in the hipster garb that was hidden beneath his angelic robes, and can only communicate through singsong. Baltaragis promptly captures him and despite Pinčiukas identifying himself as an angel, Baltaragis declares his joy at having lassoed a "little devil." Like catching a Leprechaun or discovering a genie, the miller plans to force his prize to grant him a wish: a comely bride to share his labors. Pinčiukas agrees, but at the cost of the hand of any daughter of the miller's union with his beloved -- a

Rumpelstiltskin bargain (or a Team Jacob if your only portal to mythology is through Stephenie Meyer and please read an actual book) -- of course Baltaragis and the ravishing bride Marcelė (Vaiva Mainelytė) give birth to a pretty little girl at the cost of the mother's life. Predictably, once he becomes the father of a grown daughter Jurga (also Vaiva Mainelytė), Baltaragis has second thoughts about his bargain with Pinčiukas and seeks a way out. The lessons of making deals with the devil, even if it's an angel, have everything to do with the bargains one makes with their own morality in the pursuit of things that don't hold any real value. Its moral is easy to read as a harsh critique of capitulation and the promise of being swindled in the long run whatever the immediate gratification in the here and now. Most lottery winners end up bankrupt. Most quislings are the first to have their necks measured for the guillotine.

Almost all of the dialogue of *The Devil's Bride* is sung in a style somewhere between traditional musical (as in the opening sequence) and recitative (in the style of Jacques Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* and *The Young Girls of Rochefort*). Paired with the lushness of its setting, the uncanniness of this approach feeds into the allegorical nature of the piece - an essential element for its effectiveness and cult status, but also a barrier against government censure by being both an adaptation of an already-accepted cultural document (the novel Whitehorn's Windmill by Kazys Boruta, written during the German occupation and re-written during the Soviet occupation) and a piece that requires some measure of critical capacity to unpack. It's easier to dismiss *The Devil's Bride* as camp than it is to confront it as full bore countercultural assault. What do you mean you want my children to accept the burden of this generation's mistakes? God is dead in his heaven or a sadist; everything you promised would bring you happiness was a lie; the only thing that is constant is nature and how little it cares for the brief, ugly little affairs of man. Once done, it all starts again. I should state the obvious, too, that the music in *The Devil's Bride* sounds a little like The Who's *Tommy* album, immortalized in film in 1975 by the aforementioned madman/genius Ken Russell, meaning that *The Devil's Bride* has about it the unshakeable patina of Sixties psychedelia for all the right reasons. I love how it marries its spirit of youth and revolution with its belief in the transformative power of love. On the night of Jurga's conception, for instance, Baltaragis and Marcelė sit on the lawn of their

mill, set in an imitation of God's banquet before a lake, serenaded by the heavenly host holding candles half-submerged. I thought of Jack Kerouac then - and his toast/prayer about kindness and love, and how if we were to notice its abundance here we would see that we are already in heaven now. Life is short, grace is fleeting. If we fail to mark these moments when they occur, we squander every reason to be alive.

Algimantas Mockus' cinematography is simple and gorgeous. Everything is framed and lit like a painted illustration from an antique and beloved children's book. Watch when handsome suitor Girdvainis (Regimantas Adomaitis), well-muscled in tunic and hewn breeches, races his cart to vie for Jurga's hand through forest light dappled like a hot dream: how his scenes are overloaded with masculine vitality and lust, and how a sudden mist from the fires set by a jealous Pinčiukas to slow Girdvainis' advance casts a supernatural pall over everything like the suggestion of dusk in a Maxfield Parrish tableaux. Did I mention the image of a disembodied fiddle scoring a mad courtship between Pinčiukas and the miller's sister Uršulė (Regina Varnaitė) - the romantic arrangement Bartalragis hopes to persuade Pinčiukas to accept in lieu of Jurga's hand? Is the hand playing the fiddle a hint of Cocteau's rapturous live-action *Beauty and the Beast* (1946) perhaps? An animate world inhabited by disembodied and dismembered servants and magical beings trapped against their will in the orbit of the petty, finite melodramas of limited beings? What is it that Puck says? "What fools these mortals be!"? Pinčiukas longs for Jurga but, more, he longs to be returned to Heaven and the presence of his Father when he sees himself ultimately for what he is, just another created being trapped by the same desires and jealousies as God's other creations. Pinčiukas casts a net baited with flowers to catch happiness and he's rewarded for his ministrations with garbage and disgust. "Oh how unhappy I am," he sings, "How sad I am upon this earth. I cannot find friends for me," then looking to the sky, "oh, little cloud, wait, perhaps you'll take me back?" His recognition of the crystalline brutality of the baseness and suffering of Man at the moment of his lynching - this rough handling of a celestial being by a band of brutal, superstitious yokels - convinces pragmatic Uršulė that Pinčiukas is a human being worth spending her life with. The secret hero of the piece for her groundedness and decency, Uršulė figures out a way to get Pinčiukas "tested" rather than immolated in a ritual of

mistletoe. She ties her fate with his when he's thrown into the lake by following him into the drink. It's a marriage through baptism and it's genuinely graceful. Rather than recreate the ritual of Christ's martyrdom, in other words, she gives Pinčiukas the opportunity to more genuinely experience what it is to be human. Not just the suffering, mind, but the rapturous joy to which we all are privy, but only now and again and then just for a moment or two… and damned if it isn't enough.

The Lithuanian critic Saulius Macaitis wrote about *The Devil's Bride*:

> This is one of the most successful and unique Lithuanian films. By choosing the form of a musical or a rock opera the author remained in touch with the book, but at the same time created an original work. Vivid and expressive, it is a boldly modernised spectacle driven by music composed by Ganelinas... *The Devil's Bride* is busting the myth about the grim nature of the Lithuanians.

I think more than exploding the myth of stoicism for the Lithuanian people, it does a fair amount of exorcism of cultural misunderstandings for all of the Eastern Bloc countries. It slots in with films like Georgi Kropachyov's and Konstantin Yershov's *Viy* (1967) and Armenian auteur Sergei Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates* - Parajanov who studied under Ukrainian filmmakers Igor Savchenko and Oleksandr Dovzhenko. It is bold. It is packed with explosive kinetic energy: it is condensed youth in a bottle. Of all the films I've mentioned that it reminds me of, the one it might remind me of the most is Walter Hill's rock opera *Streets of Fire* (1984) which also exists in "another place, another time"; is possessed of a stunning color palette and vibrant, hyperreal visual sensibility, but most importantly it distills somehow what it means to be young and drunk with promise. It's also, appearing right at the beginning of the second Reagan term, a work reflective of generational defiance: a middle finger to the values and expectations right there at the birth of neo-conservatism's regressive "make America great" movement that sought to erase the sins of the father in order to radicalize the worst of us. A new world order built on ignorance and fear. Hill's film is a protest song in the same way as *The Devil's Bride*: a story about how we tell stories and the importance of the

stories we tell, sure, but a celebration of the energy and the hope of the young who might yet be idealistic enough, and energetic enough in their outrage, to save us with the fury of their love.

Walter Chaw is Senior Film Critic for FilmFreakCentral.net. He has bylines in the *NY Times, Washington Post, Criterion, The LA Weekly, NY Post's Decider, NY Magazine's Vulture*, and is an occasional guest on NPR's "Pop Culture Happy Hour." He has written a monograph on *Miracle Mile* and a critical study of the career of Walter Hill called "A WALTER HILL FILM."

Production Sketches by Filomena Linčiūtė-Vaitiekūnienė.
Courtesy of the Lithuanian Theatre, Music and Cinema Museum

Our enormous thanks to Monika Edgar, director Arūnas Žebriūnas' daughter, for sharing these photos from her family's archive.

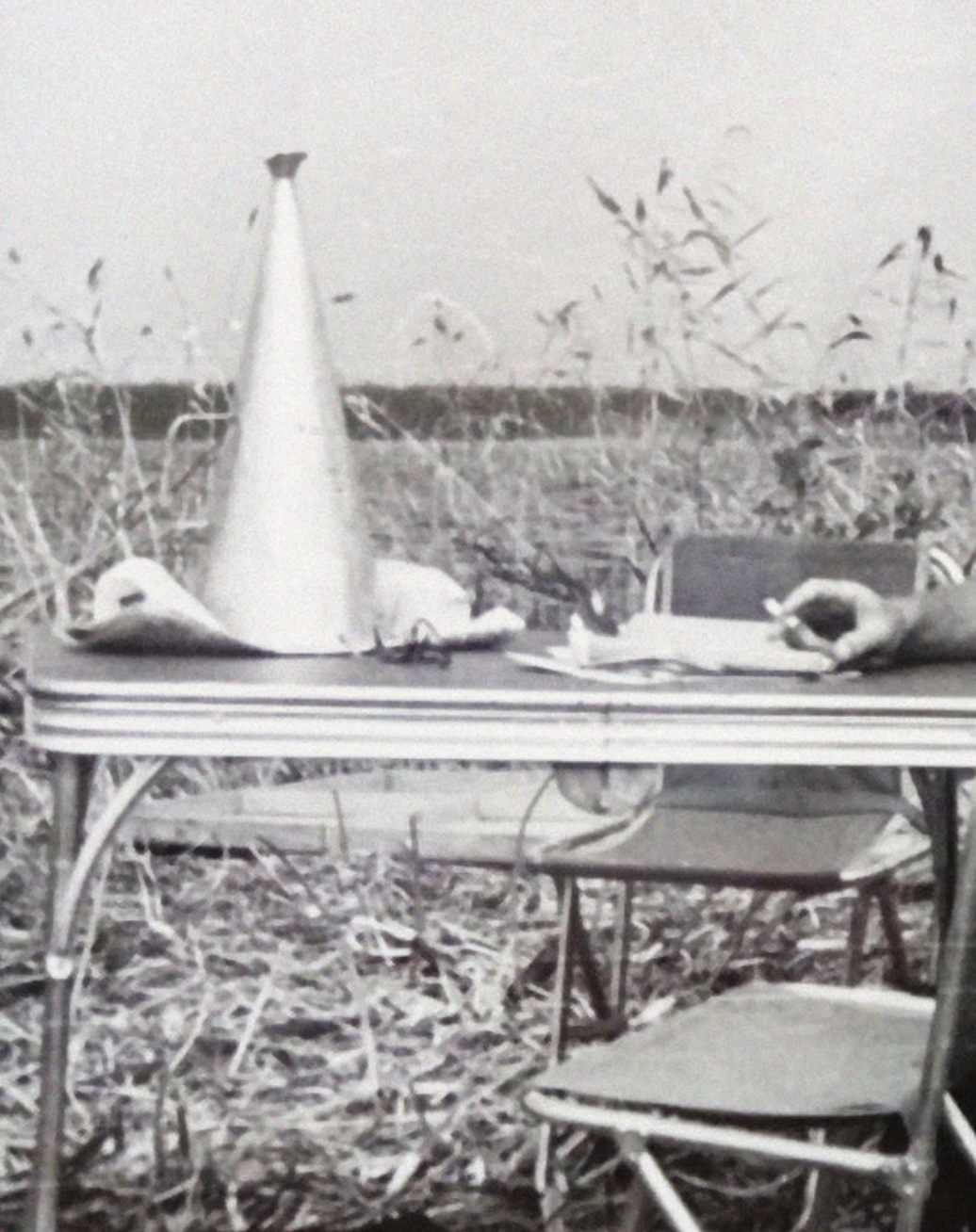
Giedrė Kaukaitė (wife), daughter Monika and Arūnas Žebriūnas in 1972 © Monika Edgar

Giedrė, Arūnas and Monika at home in 1972

Arūnas, Giedrė and Monika by the fireplace in 1973

Arūnas Žebriūnas (right) and cinematographer Algimantas Mockus (left) on the set of THE DEVIL'S BRIDE in 1974

Arūnas Žebriūnas (with megaphone) directing on KANONADA (1961)



Arūnas Žebriūnas as set designer on the film LIVE HEROES (1959)

Arūnas Žebriūnas (left) and cinematographer Algimantas Mockus (middle) helping prepare the set for THE DEVIL'S BRIDE in 1974

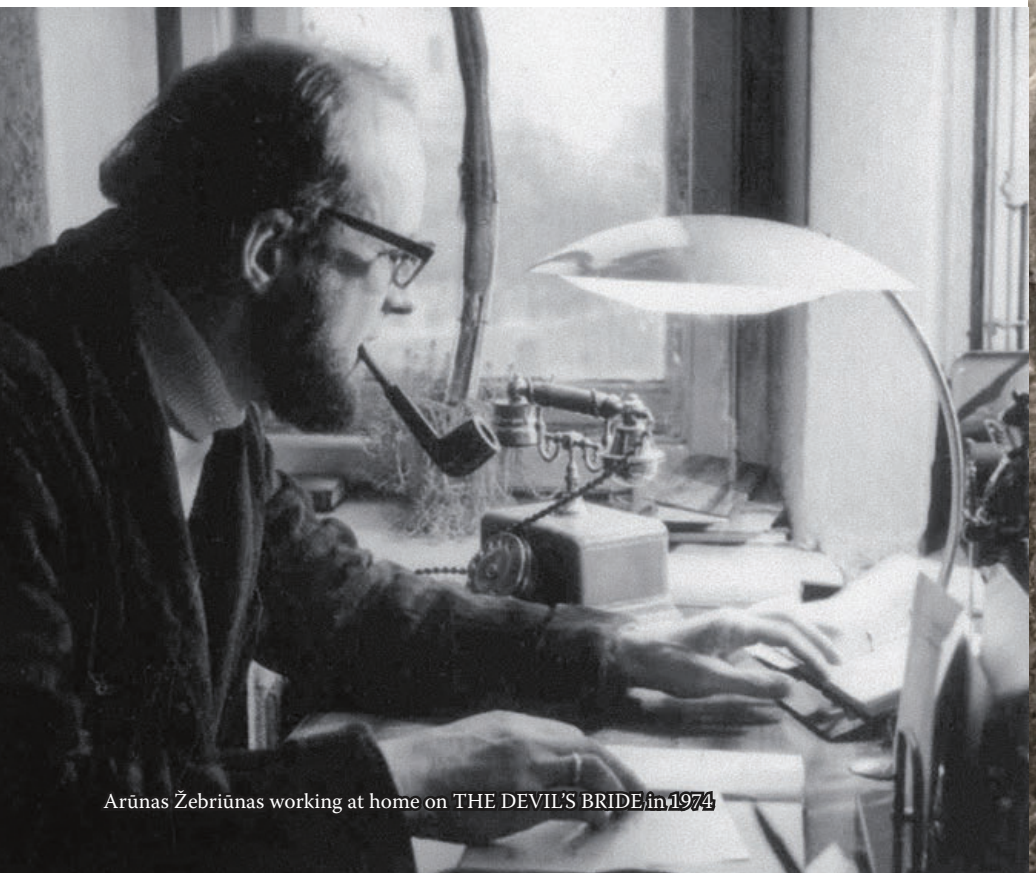
Arūnas Žebriūnas on the completion of THE DEVIL'S BRIDE

Notes on Restoration

Image restoration was made in 2015 by the Lithuanian company Madstone https://www.madstone.eu/ The main restorer was Jonas Zagorskas.

Sound restoration was made in Poland by the Polish company Dubbfilm Studio https://dubbfilm.pl/

Movie reels were digitized in the Lithuanian Central State Archive.



Arūnas Žebriūnas working at home on THE DEVIL'S BRIDE in 1974

Arūnas Žebriūnas (right) and composer Viačeslavas Ganelinas on THE DEVIL'S BRIDE

Special Thanks to:

Eglė Šinkūnaitė / Lithuanian Film Centre
Aida Juodienė / Lithuanian Theatre, Music and Cinema Museum
Filomena Linčiūtė-Vaitiekūnienė
Rimvydas Strikauskas
Monika Žebriūnaitė-Edgar
Ieva Šukytė
Žygimantas Jančoras
Austė Jucytė
Michael Brooke
Alexandra Heller-Nicholas
Walter Chaw
Dr. Will Dodson and Ryan Verrill of Someone's Favorite Productions
Beth Morris
Hannah Vandermolen
David Mackenzie / Fidelity In Motion
Jesse Nelson / DiabolikDVD

And a special thanks to Rokas Andriuškevičius for recommending THE DEVIL'S BRIDE to us in the first place!

Feature and short films © Lithuanian Film Centre, under license to Deaf Crocodile Films 2024.
All other Special Features © Deaf Crocodile Films 2025.